DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 090 UD 029 928

AUTHOR Goto, Stanford T.
TITLE Nerds, Normal People, and Homeboys: Asian American Students and the Language of School Success.
PUB DATE 7 Apr 94
NOTE 44p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Asian Americans; *Cultural Influences; High Schools; High School Students; Minority Group Children; Peer Relationship; Research; *Student Attitudes; *Student Behavior

ABSTRACT

This study used ethnographic methods to examine current explanations of Asian American students' success in school and how a group of high-achieving Chinese American high school freshmen perceive themselves and others as learners and as group members. The study attempts to illustrate (1) how the students view educational achievement and group membership in the school setting, (2) how these sets of beliefs inter-relate, and (3) how these beliefs influence the students' actions in school. First, major areas of research are reviewed that describe Asian American success, followed by a determination of how students' perceptions of educational achievement relate to existing research. It is argued that Chinese Americans' perception of peers is the most immediate factor influencing their attitudes and behaviors within the school setting. It also shows that their attitudes were reinforced by family and cultural factors: the students were aware of their parents' sacrifices for them, and they felt a sense of obligation to do well in school. The paper concludes with thoughts on how these perceptions are influenced by the broader community of students. (Contains 35 references.) (GLR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 371 090

Nerds, Normal People, and Homeboys: Asian American Students and the Language of School Success

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
S. T. Goto
Univ. of California
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Stanford T. Goto

Graduate School of Education
University of California
5647 Tolman Hall
Berkeley, CA 94720

AERA Presentation
April 7, 1994
New Orleans, LA

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FL021926 ED371090

The second period world history students are still getting settled as morning announcements drone over the intercom. The announcer's words are nearly drowned out by the cacophony of a dozen simultaneous discussions, punctuated by Mr. Reed's football-coach voice warning talkers to be quiet. Most of the students are seated at their desks. Some are rummaging through their book bags, retrieving notebooks and accessories. The flurry of '90210' binders, athletic shoes, neon pencil cases, Malcom X apparel, and oversized NFL jackets oddly matches the collage of student artwork on the walls. Mr. Reed is checking his role sheet to see if everyone is present. Karim is sitting on top of his desk, showing Bradford his high tops. Misa is braiding Carol's hair, and Tim has his head on the desk. Alicia pulls a spray bottle of mouthwash from her backpack and declares in a voice loud enough to be heard across the class that Chloraseptic is better than Scope. Mr. Reed pauses. He tells her to put the bottle away. Tim looks up briefly and then puts his head down again.

As teachers and researchers surveying this scene, we might easily overlook Tim, a quiet Chinese American student who sits near the back of the room. We tend to focus our attention where there is the greatest need, namely on students who appear most likely to fail. In Tim's case there is no outward indication that he is "at risk" academically. Aside from occasional dozing or chatting in class, Tim is fairly diligent in his school work. He spends most of the class hour taking notes, and he does all of his homework, earning "B"s and "A"s. It is likely that our assessment of Tim is influenced, at least in part, by some common conceptions about Asian American achievement. Educators and media pundits have hailed the rise of the "model minority", a term describing the alleged success of Asian Americans in academic and professional life (Takaki, 1989). We may be tempted to assume that Tim and others like him are culturally primed for high achievement.

Over the last decade researchers have questioned the myth of universal Asian American success. Some point out that Asian groups have widely varying cultural and economic backgrounds (see Trueba, Cheng and Ima, 1993). Others argue that supposedly successful Asian groups have been able to advance only in a relatively narrow range of fields-- specifically science and engineering and other technical areas-- and only up to mid-levels of management (see Takaki, 1989). According to these views, educational success has come only to some Asian groups, and even for these groups it has provided only limited vertical and lateral mobility.

Central to this question of Asian success are the roles which language and culture play in facilitating or hindering educational and professional access. It would be easy to conclude that many Asians gravitate toward technical fields because these disciplines do not emphasize communication skills, which require a sophisticated command of the English language. This explanation may be true for recent immigrants, but it does not apply to English-proficient Asian Americans. Language, it seems, is only part of the picture. Trueba et al. (1993) argue that there is a "hidden curriculum" embedded in the American educational system, particularly in the language arts and social sciences. American educators, they claim, have an unwritten understanding that student achievement is measured, not only by high grades, but also by "well-roundedness" (e.g., eclectic interests, leadership abilities, confidence, social skills). Underlying these beliefs is the assumption that students need to be flexible, independent thinkers in order to function well in American society. These beliefs, which are deeply engrained in the educational system, are not revealed explicitly, so students essentially must be cultural "natives" in order to participate fully in the hidden curriculum. This tends to put Asian newcomers at a disadvantage. Again, this explanation in and of itself does not explain why English-proficient Asian Americans make particular

educational choices. It does, however, suggest the role that cultural discontinuity might play.

This study is an attempt to complicate current explanations of Asian American success in school. Using ethnographic methods, I examine how a group of high-achieving Chinese American[1] high school freshmen perceive themselves and others as learners and as group members. I attempt to illustrate: 1) how the students view educational achievement and group membership in the school setting; 2) how these sets of beliefs inter-relate; and 3) how these beliefs influence the students' actions in school. I begin by reviewing major areas of research which describe Asian American success, and then I determine how students' perceptions of educational achievement relate to existing research. Finally, I consider how these perceptions are influenced by the broader community of students.

Background

Educational research has tended to focus on two aspects of Asian American culture-- namely academic/professional success and compatibility with middle class White culture. Much of the work examines how cultural values and socio-economic circumstances have allowed Asian Americans to improve their social status. These studies tend to emphasize how Asian Americans have adapted to changing social conditions and how they have modified their values and actions so they do not conflict with the dominant culture. I refer to these actions as "accommodation."[2] I argue that the research emphasizing success and

[1] For purposes of this paper, I use the term "Chinese American" to refer to an individual of Chinese or Taiwanese ancestry who was either born in the United States or who has at least permanent resident status and who is proficient enough in English to be in regular (non-ESL) classes.

[2] This use is different than Gibson's definition (1988). She uses the term "accommodation" to describe the phenomenon of minority individuals "subordinat(ing) their ways to those of the dominant group" (p. 25). Whereas Gibson's definition emphasizes how minorities refrain from using their traditional ways, I use the term to describe how Asian Americans modify their beliefs and actions.

accommodation have, for the most part, failed to take into account internal conflicts which lead some individuals to resist traditional educational values.

Researchers have been intrigued by Asian American academic success because it does not correlate strongly with common predictors. In most groups, there is a distinct relationship between children's success in school and the parents' income and educational levels. This holds true in some Asian American populations (Sue and Okazaki, 1990; Trueba et at., 1993). Because contemporary immigration laws favor individuals with special training, there are relatively large proportions of college-educated Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants in the United States. The children of these professionals tend to fare well in American schools. Researchers point out, however, that when all foreign and American-born Asians are considered, the presence of highly educated, foreign-born individuals does not account for the overall trends of success among Asian American students (Sue and Okazaki, 1990). Ogbu (1983) argues that children of uneducated laborers and those of professional immigrants have had similar rates of success in American schools. Reviewing similar findings, Divoky (1988) concludes that, among Asians groups, there is a low correlation between family income/education and children's academic performance.

Explanations of Asian American achievement generally fall into two major groups, which I will refer to as the family/cultural hypothesis and the status mobility hypothesis. I will explain how these theories have been applied to Chinese Americans in particular.

According to the family/cultural hypothesis, Chinese Americans tend to do well in American schools because they maintain a cultural belief in the importance of education as a means for self-advancement. This folk belief certainly is not unique to Chinese Americans. What is significant is the extent to which Chinese American students adopt it as a personal and social goal. Yu and Yang (1992)

explain that, for Asians, the desire to achieve is socially motivated in the sense that individuals want to live up to the expectations of family and community. It is not that individuals give up personal goals in order to pursue collective goals. Rather, they formulate their personal goals, keeping societal expectations in mind. In some cases, the goals of others may be so central in one's consciousness that they may be experienced as personal goals. In other cases, fulfilling one's goals may require accommodating others' goals, which are different from one's own (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

The central assumption in this hypothesis is that the family is the primary socializing mechanism for conveying societal values (Hartman and Askounis, 1989). Parents teach their children cultural norms such as self-discipline, respect for authority, and willingness to make sacrifices. These are reinforced primarily by the mother, who indulges the children with attention and material rewards (Divoky, 1988; Kim and Chun 1992). The children develop a sense of filial piety and obligation out of gratitude, which motivates them to fulfill their parents' wishes for them to excel in school. Researchers characterize this relationship as one of interdependence (Hartman and Askounis, 1989; Sue, 1973). All family members rely on each other to fulfill their duties (i.e., parents conveying social expectations, and children following them) so that the social order and the collective good may be preserved. Parents may appeal to the children's sense of shame or guilt in order to discourage deviations from these behavioral norms (Sue, 1973).

The family/cultural hypothesis is criticized by researchers who argue that it is not sufficiently comprehensive. Ogbu (1983) points out that this explanation does not consider political and economic settings. It does not, for example, explain why the children of immigrant laborers and professionals have done equally well in the United States, whereas in China their peers have vastly

different cultural practices and rates of success in school. Sue and Okazaki (1990) question the claim that Asian American culture is unique in its emphasis on advancement through education. They point to empirical evidence suggesting that middle-class White families have similar attitudes about respecting authority and making parents proud. These researchers argue that Asian American cultural factors are significant only when considered in the economic and social context of the late twentieth century United States.

Ogbu (1983) explains that after World War II, the opportunity structure shifted in favor of Chinese Americans, who benefited from their new image as American allies. This favorable image, along with the post-war manpower shortage, prompted White employers to hire Chinese for high-level jobs, which were previously inaccessible to them. After the Chinese Exclusion Acts were lifted, there was a surge of immigration, which included a large proportion of wealthy, well-educated individuals. This influx increased the number of Chinese Americans in high-level positions, which reinforced children's perception that one is rewarded for pursuing higher education.

This explanation follows the status mobility hypothesis, which holds that minority groups pursue advancement through education when: 1) they have a positive folk theory about education; and 2) they have an avenue for self-advancement; and 3) their empirical experience confirms their folk beliefs (Ogbu, 1983). Sue and Okazaki (1990) explain that in any group there is a drive for upward mobility. Individuals will try to improve their status through education when they perceive it as a viable path and when other opportunities are limited. In the short run, they will persist if they are culturally oriented toward education, and in the long run, they are likely to persist if they experience actual success.

According to these researchers, the Asian American maintain the belief that one's personal success is determined by the amount of effort one exerts in school

and work (Hess et al., 1987). In other words, they believe that they control their own academic and professional destinies. In a study of attitudes toward education, Mizokawa and Ryckman (1990) claim that this is the only significant difference between the beliefs of Asian Americans and those of middle-class Whites. Sue and Okazaki (1990) argue that this sense of self-efficacy has an immediate influence on students' persistence in school, more so than abstract cultural beliefs about the importance of education. According to this explanation, Asian American students try hard in school because they believe their future well-being depends on it.

The status mobility hypothesis is an interesting corollary to the theory of resistance, which holds that marginalized students refuse to accept the ideology of school because it does not match their empirical experience at home and in the workplace (see Giroux, 1983). In his study of working class "lads" in an English secondary school, Willis (1977) shows how these young males reject the alleged superiority of mental labor over manual labor. Perceiving a "hidden curriculum" which denies them access to power, they resist school authority and act according to the reality of the manual labor market. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) describe another striking example of resistance in their study of African American high school students who reject academic learning because they believe that to succeed in school is to "act White." The authors claim that these students have a "collective oppositional identity" which is defined by its opposition to what they perceive as the manifestations of White culture. These include getting good grades, speaking standard English, and studying. African Americans are aware that the dominant society provides them with inferior schooling and imposes a job ceiling on them. Consequently, some refuse to participate in the "White" system of education and social advancement. This behavior, according to the authors, is a coping mechanism formed in response to historical patterns of racism.

It may be inferred from resistance theory and the status mobility hypothesis that minority groups ultimately form folk theories about education based on their historical experience in school and the workplace. Marginalized groups who have been denied access to the upper echelons of power tend to form oppositional theories rejecting the usefulness of mainstream education. Groups such as Asian Americans, who supposedly have penetrated high-end job markets, tend to see education as a viable means for self-advancement. According to this explanation, Asian Americans and middle class, White Americans have similar values regarding family, education, and social status. It might be further inferred that Asian Americans would not see themselves in opposition to White culture. It would seem that the concept of "acting White" either should not exist in the Asian American cultural lexicon, or it should have no negative connotations.

This point is strongly disputed by some researchers. Ueda (1974), who argues against theories of assimilation and compatibility, suggests that Asian Americans view society in terms of "actors and audience." As actors in a foreign and sometimes hostile society, they have adapted a role that they believe White Americans want them to play. Sue and Sue (1973) claim that some Asian Americans blame the dominant society for problems experienced by minority groups. These Asians are contemptuous of others who uncritically adopt "White" ways. Drawing particular scorn are those who aspire to achieve "White, middle-class" standards of affluence. Such collaborators are labeled "bananas" (yellow on the outside and white on the inside) or "Uncle Toms" (p. 118).

These theories offer strikingly different views of the relationship between Asian Americans and the dominant White society. Is this relationship characterized by accommodation as implied by the family/cultural hypothesis and the status mobility hypothesis, or is it characterized by resistance? This study addresses these issues within the context of school.

Study Design

My entree into a classroom was provided by Mr. Reed, an African American teacher whom I knew through a university-based teacher research project. He granted me access to his two history classes at Diablo Vista High School in an urban area of Northern California. This site was selected because the population of Asian Americans (ten percent of the student body) was large enough to produce a sample for study, and yet small enough to study how Asians interact with a wide variety of non-Asians. In the two classes there were six Chinese American students: three from the second-period regular-track class and three from the third-period honors class. These students agreed to be my "focus group."

At this time I also located two Taiwanese American "key informants" with whom I could consult on a regular basis to verify my findings. Matthew was a sophomore at Diablo Vista, and Huei-Mei was a recent graduate of another local high school. I began meeting with them individually outside of school.

My initial contacts with the instructor and the key informants helped me to choose strategies for data collection. I decided to rely primarily on informal and formal interviews, which I recorded with audio tape and hand-written notes. I also observed in class and around campus, administered questionnaires, and reviewed student writing and school documents. These methods were used at different times during three general phases of data collection, which occurred over two semesters.

During the initial exploratory phase I tried to get a general sense of the students' views. My intent was to use informal interviews with the key informants to bring out major issues. In these early meetings I asked mainly descriptive questions, which provided general samples of the informants' language (Spradley, 1979). The loose structure of the interviews gave the informants freedom to bring up topics which they felt were important. I also did exploratory observation in Mr.

Reed's two history classes. During the first month I sat in the back of the room, recording the sessions on audio tape and taking notes on activities.

The second phase involved more focused methods of data collection. After transcribing my early tapes and notes, I did a rough analysis of the data, which allowed me to refine my hypotheses. I then conducted formal interviews with the focus group to test my ideas. The group setting seemed to encourage the students to engage more freely in conversation. During subsequent interviews, I administered questionnaires which focused on specific issues. These instruments were useful for gathering personal information, and they helped to stimulate informal discussions after the informants had completed them.

In the final phase of data collection, I placed more emphasis on observation to verify my initial findings. I took note of naturally occurring groups of Asians and non-Asians within and outside of the classroom. I particularly focused on how the Chinese American students interacted with other students. After these events, I interviewed the students to confirm their motivations behind their actions. Later, I conducted informal interviews with the teacher and with the key informants to discuss emerging themes.

My analysis of data involved a three-stage coding process. I first constructed a system of descriptive codes (Miles and Huberman 1984) for broad, self-defined themes such as "references to family" and "references to career." Once the data were sorted in this manner, I used Spradley's process of domain analysis[3] to reorganize the data into more specific categories. Finally, I focused my attention on the domains which appeared most frequently in the data. For each of these I did a taxonomic analysis, a search for the internal structure of each

---

[3] A domain is a symbolic category that includes two or more components with shared features of meaning (Spradley 1979).

domain (Spradley, 1979). This involved constructing taxonomies of terms and determining the semantic relationships between them.

Study Setting and Subjects

Diablo Vista was an urban high school serving a diverse community. Located in a quiet, middle-class neighborhood, the school drew students primarily from middle and low-income areas to the west and, to some extent, from more affluent areas in the hills to the east. The previous spring enrollment of 1,450 students included 55 percent African Americans, 30 percent Whites, 10 percent Asian Americans, and 5 percent Latinos and students of other ethnicities.

Teachers described Diablo Vista as the "flagship of the district." They claimed that the programs in the sciences and arts were particularly strong. The school offered a number of Advanced Placement courses, which allowed students to earn college credits if they scored well on standardized tests. In addition, there were honors courses in math and social studies. These were more demanding versions of the corresponding regular-track courses. Diablo Vista had the top math department in the area, and it once had an extensive dance department, which offered such esoteric classes as Afro-Haitian dance, classical ballet, and modern jazz dance. It was especially true in the past that the school's reputation tended to draw highly-qualified, progressive faculty members. With this combination of influential staff people and successful students, Diablo Vista won the favor of the district so that "what Diablo Vista wanted, Diablo Vista got."

Over the last few years, the school had fallen on harder times because the prolonged state budget crisis had forced the school to scale back drastically. One major problem was the declining enrollment. Alarmed by the perceived decay of the public schools, a significant number of parents who had the financial means decided to send their children to private schools rather than to Diablo Vista. The perception among teachers was that the school had lost a good portion of its

highest-achieving students. Some faculty who taught Advanced Placement courses complained that they had to lower their grading standards because of this exodus.

Another problem described by teachers and students was a perceived increase in violence and drug-related activity throughout the district. Earlier in the year the school locked all outside rest rooms because these were sites of beatings and drug dealing. At the beginning of the spring semester, the district mandated that all schools institute a closed-campus policy prohibiting students from leaving or entering campus without permission during lunch. Responding to student protest, the administration organized lunch time events and brought in new fast food concessionaires.

Mr. Reed had been at Diablo Vista for six years. In addition to coaching football, he taught two freshman history sections, two algebra classes, and an ESL class (English as a second language). As the only African American male teaching college-required core classes, he felt a special responsibility for being a mentor and positive influence for students, particularly for young African American males. The students seemed to appreciate his occasional joking in class, and they generally had a high regard for him.

The classroom was located in a small building away from the main complex. The walls were covered with history-related art work. Among the items at the front were the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and a map of Africa. On the sides were students' collages on the French Reign of Terror, the Renaissance, and the Crusades. In contrast with the profusion of material on the walls, the floors and desks were clean and orderly. For most classes, the desks were arranged in six even rows facing the front, where the instructor had his desk. Occasionally, Mr. Reed had the students rearrange their desks so they all faced the center of the room.

Figure 1. Ethnic Distributions by History Section

	Afr.Am.	White	Asian	Latino/Other	N
Regular Class	70%	13%	13%	4%	35
Honors Class	14%	62%	15%	9%	36
Whole School	55%	30%	10%	5%	1,450

The composition of Mr. Reed's classes varied from period to period (see Figure 1). In the second period regular-track class, there was a noticeable over-representation of African Americans and an under-representation of White students, compared with the make-up of the general student body. By comparison, the third period honors class had a disproportionately large group of White students and a disproportionately small group of African Americans. The representation of Asian Americans and other students in both classes was fairly consistent with the proportions in the whole school. The dynamics in these classes (i.e., the nature of student interaction with the teacher and with each other) were, indeed, quite different. It is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate about the significance of these differences.

What is important to note here is that the Asian students' behavior in both classes was more or less comparable, despite the environmental differences. Figure 2, for instance, shows that the Asian students grouped themselves in similar ways in both classes. The females in both classes tended to sit by non-Asians throughout the class; whereas the males tended to congregate toward the back corner of the room. The students in both classes explained that this seating arrangement allowed them to talk with each other and to share answers.

I suspect that their behavior was similar, at least in part, because they had similar academic experiences in this school. All of the informants were enrolled in at least one other honors class and two or more other regular-track or untracked

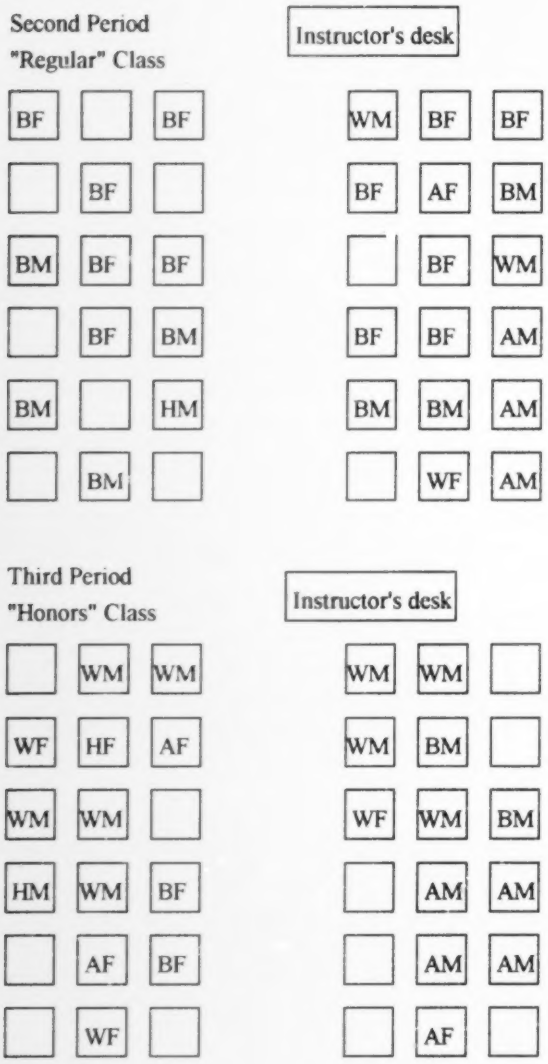

Figure 2. Seating in the History Sections

BM/BF - Black Male/Female

WM/WF - White Male/Female

AM/AF - Asian Male/Female

HM/HF - Hispanic Male/Female

Note: Blank boxes indicate seats which are occupied by different students during the period.

courses. Noting various similarities, I decided to treat the Chinese / Taiwanese American students from both classes as one cohort. The following are edited excerpts from their self-descriptions:

"Regular" Class:

> Lance, who was born in Hong Kong, has been in the United States for five years. He enjoys basketball and watching sports. P.E. is his favorite subject.

> Cindy was born in California and admits that her Chinese is not as strong as her English. Her favorite classes are French and biology, and her favorite activity is talking with friends.
>
> Tim lived in Taiwan for ten years before coming to California four years ago. Video games are his favorite pastime.

"Honors" Class:

> Sarah describes herself as a social person, although she is generally quiet in class. She speaks Mandarin, Taiwanese and English. When she is not doing school work, she likes to play the violin.
>
> Lisa, who was born in the United States. Her favorite classes are English, history, and biology. She points out that immature students irritate her.
>
> Ming-Suin immigrated to the United States from Vietnam when he was two years old. In addition to Vietnamese, which is his first language, he speaks English and some Chinese. Of his six classes, he enjoys history and Spanish the most.

These students have a number of other comparable traits, in addition to being 14 or 15 year-old high school freshmen. All come from two-parent families who immigrated to the United States from Asia. Furthermore, all of the students speak at least two languages, and all have a 3.5 grade point average or better (average 3.8 according to self-reported scores).

Principle Findings

The following exchange illustrates the students' belief about the role of education in their lives: Lisa and Lance were sitting together during lunch, talking about bad teachers. Lance was unhappy about his English class. The teacher, he explained, did not really teach the materials. The topic struck a nerve with Lisa, who proceeded to describe her geometry class in which she got a less-than-acceptable grade:

> I mean I had a C in geometry, and this is like my first C, and it was like so retarded, so devastating for me. It was like, 'Oh my God I got a C.' And

> like, on the other hand, other kids are like, 'Yes, I got a C. I'm so happy.' And I'm like, 'Oh no, the world is coming to an end.' I mean it's so retarded if you think about it, like a C. It says you're so average or whatever.

For Lisa and the other students in the study, the grade was more than an evaluation of their work. It was a reflection of who they were. Lisa did not consider herself to be a "C" student, an "average" person. The thought was unacceptable. In distinguishing herself from those who were happy to get C's, she declared that she belonged to a qualitatively different category of student.

I begin this section with Lisa's comment because it illustrates a crucial concept among Chinese American students-- the idea of distinguishing oneself and setting oneself apart, at least in terms of one's accomplishments. The family/cultural hypothesis and the status mobility hypothesis suggest that Asian students wholeheartedly strive to distinguish themselves in academics, as Lisa's statement implies. I believe it accurate to claim that many want to do well in school. However, I would also argue that the thought of being distinguished comes with a great deal of ambivalence.

In this section I explore these concepts in greater detail. I assess how the students' actual views of education compare with the archetypal views described by the status mobility hypothesis and the family/cultural hypothesis. I then analyze how these views influence the students' actions within the social context of school. Finally, I identify points of conflict where belief frames clash and where resistance may occur.

As the status mobility hypothesis predicts, there was a strong consensus among these students that they had to be successful in school in order to fulfill their future plans. The comments below were typical:

> If you want to do something, like when you're older, and if you don't get an education, you can't do that. If you want to succeed and everything- everything that happens- you go to school. It depends on that. It's like

whatever you want to do when you grow up, you need an education.

> I mean a lot of people see education as a step to prepare them for the next- prepare them for the next step. When they study, they study not because they're enjoying the studies, but they study because they will have a good future, and they will get into a good school. So they see education as a kind of prepare them for a better level.

Such statements support the premise that Chinese American students see education as the primary (and perhaps the only) avenue to success in life. When asked about their goals, the students responded without hesitation that they planned to attend a four-year university. This was the unanimous response on a questionnaire item and in later interviews. The students felt that the only way to get a desirable position in life was to get a college degree. The key, in their view, was hard work and self-discipline. Explaining their success in school, two students commented:

> What has helped me to be successful? I don't know. I just study hard.

> We're (Asian American students are) just working harder than they (non-Asian students) are.

Consistent with the status mobility hypothesis, these comments reflect the folk theory that "if I study hard, I can succeed" (Sue and Okazaki, 1990, p. 919).

Ironically, although the students saw a specific means to self-advancement (i.e., working hard in school), they did not have a specific end in mind. One student explained:

> I'm just studying and want to obtain good grades so I can go to a good college, but at the same time I don't really know what I want to be.

Other informants gave similar responses. When asked about their long-term goals, only two mentioned careers. These perceptions have some interesting implications for the status mobility hypothesis. Ogbu's model (1983) assumes that minorities are highly aware of their peers' success or lack of success in accessing job markets, and that their empirical observations shape their folk theories and ultimately their

actions. It is not clear from the data how or if Chinese American students were influenced by the professional successes of adults. One student reported that she considered all job areas open to her, whether or not Asian Americans have been successful in those areas in the past.[4]

It seems that the students defined status mobility on a more immediate level. While they were not consciously aware of the opportunity structure in the job market, they were keenly aware of advancement opportunities within the educational system. Frequent topics of discussion included which teachers were the easiest and which extra-curricular activities looked good on college applications. A favorite classroom activity (in addition to gossiping about others) was comparing grades. In these ways they closely monitored each other's success. The Chinese American students essentially constructed their own localized status mobility system within academia.

In discussing the origins of their attitudes toward education, the students consistently mentioned their parents. Figure 3 illustrates how they viewed their parents' influence. This taxonomy suggests that they interacted with their parents in many of the ways described by the family/cultural hypothesis. The informants acknowledged, for instance, that parents "help you" (term 2) and "encourage you" (term 3) by offering emotional support and by providing resources to aid in study. These accounts are consistent with the notion that Asian parents indulge their children in order to create an emotional bond which motivates their children to comply with their wishes.

It is interesting to note that, in some cases, the students perceived this type of relationship as a form of pressure, as well as a mutually beneficial symbiosis.

---

[4] This, however, does not address the possibility that the youth are sub-consciously influenced by observing successful adults.

Figure 3. Taxonomic Definition of How Parents Motivate Their Children[5]

1. Pressure you
    - 1.1 Compare you with other students
    - 1.2 (Make you feel obligated)
        - 1.2.1 Set high expectations of you
        - 1.2.2 Feel proud of you
        - 1.2.3 Work hard for you
    - 1.3 Threaten you
        - 1.3.1 Punish you
        - 1.3.2 Yell at you
2. Help you
    - 2.1 Talk to you
    - 2.2 Get you a tutor
3. Encourage you
4. Educate you

They recognized that, in benefiting from their parents' sacrifices (term 1.2.3), they had a certain obligation to do well in school. Slaughter-Defoe et al. explain that "...the family teaches children the importance of- indeed the more imperative of- repaying one's parents for their sacrifices" (1990, p. 365). This concept underlies one student's comment:

> They work hard, and they want you to have a better life. They urge you to work hard in school.

Implicit in this statement is the understanding that the parents want the child to be successful, not only for his or her sake, but also to provide the parents with tangible evidence of what their investment has produced. In this way, the carrot of parental indulgence is also a stick. When asked if this type of pressure is good or bad, the informants all responded with some ambivalence that it is both. They enjoyed the attention and the material rewards which they received at home, but they did not like the feeling that they had to live up to their parents' expectations

[5] The included terms in this and following taxonomic analyses are listed in descending order of how many times the terms appeared in the data. Items in parentheses are etically defined.

(term 1.2.1).

One area that the family/cultural hypothesis does not emphasize is how the children's success is judged relative to individuals outside the family. The model of family interdependence implies that the relationships between parents and children are shaped primarily by dynamics within the family unit. This does not take into account that the parents base their expectations, at least in part, on how well other children are performing (term 1.1). This issue came up a number of times in the interviews:

> And probably most of the Asian parents would compare their children with other people's child, so they- if their children are doing good, and that gives them a sense of pride.

> Like my parents always compete me with other people- other Asian kids, and how they are very successful. And in a way that would motivate me to do very good because I want to be like them, too.

The term "compete" indicates the specific nature of the comparison. By comparing their child's test scores with those of another child, the parents apparently placed the children in competition with each other. The prize for winning the competition was earning the parents' pride and praise. Some students felt that this competition benefited them because it motivated them to try harder. Not surprisingly, those who had this opinion were also those who had the best grades among the informants I interviewed. Others were more ambivalent. They felt that their parents put too much emphasis on competition. All of the informants did agree, however, that their parents' pushiness would help them achieve higher positions in life, which in the long run was in the best interests of the children and the parents.

While this analysis tends to supports the family/cultural hypothesis and the status mobility hypothesis, it also suggests that there is a third, perhaps more

immediate factor-- the students' perceptions of their peers-- influencing their views of education. In some ways, these views mediated how they perceived parental pressure and status mobility. The students saw their parents pressuring them to compete with other children. Similarly, the students looked to the accomplishments of their friends in order to determine the best opportunities for advancement in the educational system. It appears that the influence of family and personal aspirations for success were relatively distal motivations, compared with the students' more immediate concerns about where they stood in relation to their peers.

The frequent references to friends prompted me to look specifically at these relationships. In a group discussion I asked the informants about the kinds of friends they have. They named the following types: "school friends", "people I just say 'hi' to", "church friends", "friends I see on weekends", "neighborhood friends", "friends who live in other places", and "friends I play sports with." I decided to focus on the most frequently mentioned category, school friends. An analysis of this data is show in Figure 4.

Conspicuously missing from this taxonomy are references to race. None of the informants mentioned race as a primary criterion for selecting friends. Yao (1985) claims that Asian American children tend to make friends with people with similar cultural backgrounds. This tendency, in her view, serves to reinforce family and cultural values of education. All of the informants in the study had mostly Asian school friends, but none sought Asian company exclusively. Listing the ethnicities of their friends, the focus group students reported that between them, they had friends who were Chinese, Japanese, African American, White, and Latino. Each of the informants claimed to have friends who belonged to three or more of these groups, the most common being Chinese and Japanese and the next most common being White. One student explained:

> It's like sometimes only Asian people hang out with only Asians. There are some people that have friends that are mixed races. It depends on the person.

It appears that race was a criterion in selecting friends, but it was not the only one. A more important criterion was that the individuals had common interests, a condition which was likely to occur between Asian Americans but which also could occur with students of other ethnicities. The emphasis in seeking communality was to establish harmony in the relationship (term 4).

Figure 4. Taxonomic Definition of the Qualities of a School Friend

1. Won't betray you
    - 1.1 (Someone) you can depend on
    - 1.2 Trustworthy
    - 1.3 Honest
    - 1.4 (Doesn't) talk about me
2. Has a good personality
    - 2.1 Good attitude
    - 2.2 Nice
    - 2.3 Friendly
    - 2.4 Clowny
3. Helps you out
    - 3.1 Helps you with (school) problems
    - 3.2 Supports you
4. Get along with one another
    - 4.1 Respect(s) what I think
    - 4.2 Things in common
    - 4.3 (Doesn't) get me mad
5. Has a good reputation
    - 5.1 Doing OK in school
    - 5.2 Not in gangs
6. Motivates you

One specific requirement was that friends have similar views toward education. The students tended to befriend others who were high achievers and serious students (terms 5.1 and 5.2). These relationships could stimulate

competition in getting good grades. Some enjoyed these contests, which motivated them to work harder than they would alone:

> I mean all my friends- they study hard, so that kind of motivate me to study hard because I guess I kind of compete with them in a way... Not really compete, but, you know, you just want to obtain a better grade than the other person.

This view, however, was not universally shared. Other students deliberately avoided this type of competition because it created unnecessary pressure. These students also tended to seek others who had similar educational views, but they did so to gain support (term 3). Having friends who took the same classes and struggled with the same problems allowed them to pool their knowledge and to help each other get through these difficulties:

> Like if you have a problem, then you can ask them, and they'll help you. If you have a problem with your homework, you can ask them. They're just there for you.

This camaraderie in the face of diversity also allowed them to endure such pressures as overly zealous parents. Because the support they sought required a great deal of mutual trust, the Chinese American students placed a premium on friends who would not betray them (term 1).

The following is an example of how the students would help each other in class: The third period students were watching quietly as the film, the Kitchen Toto, came to a tragic climax. Some were writing notes on the study question handout. As the film ended, Mr. Reed turned on the lights and asked the students how they felt about the ending. There was a pause. One girl said she was sad that the young protagonist was shot at the end, and another student brought up the topic of police brutality. Mr. Reed asked the class how authorities use force unfairly in our society. He recalled his own experience as an undergraduate, when he saw how police put down student protests. Most of the class watched intently as Mr.

Reed dramatized the events. Ming-Suin, along with Alan, Mike and Shawn, three other Asian American students, were seated together in their regular group near the back of the class. Ming-Suin and Shawn watched Mr. Reed for a few seconds and then went back to their worksheets. Mike taped Alan on the shoulder and asked him what he got for number three. Alan handed him his paper. Shawn looked up again, apparently interested in Mr. Reed's description of how the police killed a belligerent youth at a bus station. Mike gave Alan's paper back, and Ming-Suin asked Alan about number five.

When asked about this behavior, the focus group students commented:

> You help others, and they'll like pay you back with things. You know you help each other.

> In that time like me and my two friends behind me um we like work on it together. And um like sometimes they'll have reading questions where you have to make or like (utterance unclear). We like do that together if you don't understand something.

It appears that helping each other with school work served a number of purposes. On a practical level, the students found group work to be an efficient way to accomplish a common task.[6] Furthermore, in helping each other out, they maintained a system of reciprocity, which built mutual trust. This emphasis on cooperation is consistent with the family/cultural hypothesis, which characterizes relationships between individuals as being highly interdependent.

The students' descriptions of friendship placed so much emphasis on mutual trust and support, that I form the hypothesis that they perceived a category of non-friends whom they cannot trust. To test this hypothesis, I asked them to describe the types of students on campus.

---

[6] I suspect that this is especially true if one or more of the students has problems comprehending a reading assignment. This point needs more exploration.

Figure 5. Taxonomic Definition of the Types of Students on Campus

1. Nerds
2. Normal people
3. Popular people
4. Wannabes
5. Homeboys

Although this taxonomy appears to be simple, the relations and distinctions between these categories are complex. The dimensions of contrast are analyzed in the following componential definition (Figure 6).

The most distinct dimension of contrast is knowledge (column B). It is important to note that knowledge is not a continuum with infinite increments of intelligence. Rather, it consists of three distinct categories into which all students fall. Individuals are either "smart" or "dumb" or in a state of limbo between the two.

To understand this concept we must consider the attributes of "smartness" and "dumbness." It stands to reason that nerds, who get straight A's and take honors classes (cell F.1), are considered to be smart. It appears that intelligence and success in school are aspects of being smart. These are not the only criteria, however. Normal people and popular people, who are also considered smart, are not particularly noted for earning exceptional grades. They simply do the required work (cells F.2 and F.3), and in the case of popular people, they are even less smart than they think they are. Conversely, homeboys, who are considered dumb, are not noted for getting poor grades *per se*. Instead, they are noted for being disruptive in class (cell F.5). These contrasts suggest that being smart involves participating in the school system.

The definition knowledge extends into the area of social relationships as well. The matrix shows that types of associations (column C) and activities (column D) correlate roughly with knowledge. Normal people and popular people

Figure 6. Componential Definition of the Types of Students on Campus.

	A. (ETHNICITY)	B. (KNOWLEDGE)	C. (ASSOCIATIONS)	D. (ACTIVITIES)	E. (FRIENDLINESS)	F. (SCHOOL WORK)
1. Nerds	Mostly Asian, some White	Smart.	Other nerds.	All they do is study. They don't have a social life.	(Friendly but quiet.)	Get straight A's. Honors classes.
2. Normal People	Asian, White, Latino, African American	Smart.	Other normal people, nerds, popular people.	Take care of friends. Play video games.	Friendly.	They do the work.
3. Popular People	Mostly Asian, White, some African American, Latino.	Smart.	Other popular people, normal people.	(For males:) Say 'hello' to girls. Go to school dances. Play basketball. (For females:) Play tennis. Fuss with their hair.	Friendly.	(They do the work.) (They) think they're really smart and know everything.
4. Wannabes	Mostly Asian, White, some African American, Latino.	Not really smart or dumb.	Other wannabes.	Fool around a lot.	Annoying.	Don't answer questions.
5. Homeboys	Asian, African American, Latino.	Dumb.	People of their own race.	Hang out in gangs.	Unfriendly.	Fool around in class.

Note: Items in parentheses are etically defined.

28

have the widest circles of friends (cells C.2 and C.3), and they participate in the widest variety of activities (cells D.2 and D.3). Wannabes and homeboys, on the other hand, only associate with their own respective groups (cells C.4 and C.5), and they have a restricted range of activities (cells D.4 and D.5). These contrasts suggest that another dimension of being smart involves knowing how to relate with a variety of people and knowing how to fit into a range of social situations.

In summary, it appears that the definition of knowledge includes a variety of skills. Smart people are those who know how to work successfully within the institution and who have the social skills to get along with different groups. In contrast, dumb people are those who defy institutional norms and who do not participate in mainstream social circles. In the middle are wannabes, who act like homeboys but who are not sufficiently marginal to actually be in this category.

These distinctions allowed the Chinese American students to identify which groups were sympathetic or friendly (column E) to their interests. As noted earlier, these students valued having trustworthy friends who would support them. This componential analysis further suggests that they identified potential friends by their attitudes toward school, their social connections, and their activities. In particular, they preferred to associate with others who participated in education and who belonged to the mainstream social circles.

The Chinese American students believed that their choice to follow the institutional path to success put them in ideological opposition to "homeboys" and to a lesser extent "wannabes", who rejected institutional norms. Consequently, they were concerned about being singled out and ridiculed for being "smart."

> ...people make remarks, 'Ooo, you're so smart' or something, where some people say 'Ooo, you're so slow'- like tension builds up.

They expressed concern that their success in the classroom would stir up resentment among others. One informant put it flatly that it is a matter of

"jealousy." I found some evidence suggesting that some students single Asians out as being privileged. In the regular-track history class, the students were working on an art project requiring the students to contribute some cash for poster board and other materials. Adam, a White student who was complaining about the expense, pointed to Cindy (one of my informants) and exclaimed:

> I don't have 99 cents. I'm on AFDC. Money's tight around my house. I can't afford 99 cents. She can probably afford it. She probably has the money at home.

The data are not conclusive about the extent to which Chinese American students feel at odds with particular ethnic groups. Some indirect and direct comments suggest that there is tension between Asians and African Americans. In one instance, a focus group informant was describing how "homeboys" disrupt the class and bother Asian students. As I asked her to elaborate, she glanced toward an African American student who was seated a few rows away and lowered her voice to a whisper. In some instances the students used the term "homeboy" as a derogatory euphemism for African Americans. One key informant was more direct in describing tensions between the groups. He explained that, although Diablo Vista did not have serious problems in this respect, other schools did:

> At their school, Blacks kind of hunts Asians. They kind of go after Asians. So Asians are forced to like stay in their- like during lunch, they're afraid to go out. They stay in the class and work on computers, or they stay to work on something, and people walk by and go, 'Look at those nerds.'

It is interesting to note that none of the informants reported having seen or been involved in physical violence between Asians and African Americans. While most claimed they receive racial taunts at school, they did not identify particular ethnic groups as perpetrators.

The Chinese American students used specific behaviors to avoid conflict. These included: 1) congregating in groups, 2) making peace with non-Asians, and

3) making themselves appear less smart.

Your Friends are There to Help You Out

Ming-Suin and I were standing in the cafeteria lunch line. The shouting and the clashing pans was oppressively loud. As we waited, I surveyed the open space, which was the size of a small gymnasium. Perpendicular to the long walls were rows of benches and tables. The three rows nearest to us were occupied by African American students. Some were playing ma jang (a Chinese gambling game somewhat similar to dominoes). Most were eating and talking. The next three rows were not as crowded. There were groups of four or five Asians and some smaller groups of White students. The Asians were sitting near the walls. Some were looking at magazines, and others were studying. At the rest of the tables were African Americans, Whites, Latinos, Asians and others-- some in mixed groups, but most segregated by race. I asked Ming-Suin if students normally associated with people of their own race. He nodded his head. I asked if Asians mostly hang out with Asians. He nodded again. Trying to get him to elaborate, I asked where Asians congregate. The area outside the library, the cafeteria, and the court yard between the main building and the cafeteria, he explained, were the rendezvous points of choice. The south side of the main building near the portables and the area behind the cafeteria were where the African American students gather. Ming-Suin said he tries to avoid these areas. I asked him why Asians "hang out" together. He replied:

> If people think you're like smart and they like mess with you, your friends are there to help you out.

Given the absence of actual clashes, it seems this group posturing was intended to pre-empt problems.

You Want to be Nice

Lance, a Chinese American, got up to turn a paper in to Mr. Reed. As he

walked by Alan's desk, he swept his hand along the desktop, knocking Alan's book to the floor. Alan, an African American student, looked up at Lance and said to him, smiling, "What's up, blood?"

Despite the anxieties expressed by some of the students, actual encounters between Chinese Americans and non-Asians oftentimes were quite amicable, as this example suggests. Such friendly exchanges seemed to be more common with males, particularly those of later generations. One informant speculated that second or third-generation Asian males who played sports, particularly basketball, were more likely to make friends with non-Asians.

While most friendly encounters between students of different races seemed to occur spontaneously and without particular motive, some interaction was deliberately planned. The most common type of premeditated exchange involved sharing answers with non-Asians. Lisa described her Spanish class in which fellow students habitually asked to copy her work:

> I'm sitting there, and I've got these people surrounding me, and they're like, 'Oh Lisa, Lisa , what's this number?' And I'm like, 'Don't talk to me. I don't know.' And people across the room are like, 'Hey, what's this mean?' And I'm like, 'I don't know.' And it's like, 'Don't ask me.' I'm like, 'Why are you always asking me?' It's kind of like stressful to have everybody asking you 'What is this, what is this?' And when I'm done, it's like my paper gets like passed around the room so like everyone can copy it. It's like, I don't know, it's OK.

I asked her if this was the same as helping Asian friends out. I was curious why she let others use her work. She explained:

> You help others (i.e., Asian American friends), and they'll like pay you back with things. You know you help each other, but it's like in my Spanish class it's like I'll tell you the answers, but I never got anything out of it.
>
> Well, it's like you want to be nice. I mean that would be so terrible. People would be like, 'You're harsh. You have such an attitude.' I mean it's like

you're such a bad impression.

This concern about one's image may have been gender-linked. Male students also talked about sharing answers with non-Asians. However, they did not express concerns about appearing to have "an attitude." What was common in the females' and males' comments was a concern about not antagonizing class mates. It is somewhat ironic that, in using this strategy to mitigate problems caused by racial differences, the Chinese American students reinforced the perception that they were different than others. In particular, their actions made it clear that they were a willing and able source of free information.

I'd Like to Slack off on Purpose

A quite different strategy used by the Chinese Americans was to cover up evidence that they might be smart. Most often this occurred in the classroom, where the students deliberately refrained from participating so they would not stand out. In the class sessions I observed, I saw only one Asian student voluntarily address the class. I asked the focus group students how they viewed class participation, and whether they participated or not. All felt that, in principle, participation in class was important:

> I uh generally don't want to speak out that much, but I think it's better for the students to do that to get a better understanding of the material and to get to know the other students better.

As to why they generally did not participate, the students were vague. Some simply claimed they did not "feel like it." Interpreting this response, one of the key informants explained that some Asian American students deliberately refrain, not only from participating, but also from producing exceptional work, which would draw negative attention from peers.

> You could do it in five minutes, and you know everybody do it in like twenty minutes... Rather than compete with others, I'd rather be like equal with other people, so maybe I'd like to slack off on purpose.

The Burden of Acting Asian

Let us consider how these strategies fit within the status mobility hypothesis and the family /culture hypothesis. Both of these theories suggest that Chinese American views of education are supposedly compatible with the views endorsed by the educational system. According to this explanation, the students should have no reason to question the folk belief in the value of education because this beliefs is encouraged by their culture and by school. It might be inferred that any threats to their educational values would come from outside their cultural group or outside of school.

To some extent this perception motivated the Chinese American students to congregate in groups in a mutually supportive and, to some extent, defensive posture (as illustrated in Figure 1). It is not accurate to claim, however, that there was a clear line of conflict between Asians and non-Asians. While they felt antagonism toward homeboys and wannabes, they acknowledged that these groups were composed of a variety of ethnicities, including Asian. One implication is that there was no single Asian cultural frame of reference. Another is that the Chinese American students did not define group membership strictly along racial lines. In addition to associating with other Asians, they identified with a larger group of Whites, African Americans, and Latinos (cells A1, A2, A3).

The students' cognizance of belonging to heterogeneous social circles is evident in their strategies of making peace with non-Asians and in their "slacking off" their school work. While in some cases the Chinese American students deliberately used these tactics to appease potential aggressors, they often intended to promote friendship (or at least peaceful coexistence) with others. This emphasis on promoting harmony is consistent with the family /culture hypothesis. It is important to note that in the school setting the circle of inclusion was pushed beyond the "family" of Asian students to include non-Asian students. In this sense

the Chinese American students recognized that they were members of multiple (overlapping or concentric) cultural frames.

In this light, high-achieving Chinese American students appear more like the high-achieving African American students in Fordham and Ogbu (1986) than like the unhindered over-achievers portrayed by the family/culture hypothesis or the status mobility hypothesis. Both the Chinese Americans and the African American students had to cope with multiple, competing cultural beliefs. On one hand, they maintained the belief that they would benefit from educational achievement. At the same time, they felt the need to comply with their peer group's "oppositional cultural frame of reference" (p. 181). The high-achieving Chinese American and African American students recognized that they could not fully divorce themselves from potential antagonists because they shared a broader common identity. Consequently, they used a variety of strategies to mask their seriousness about school.

These behaviors were more than just theatrical acts. The Chinese American students realized that, as members of a heterogeneous school community, they had to somehow acknowledge that some of their peers did not value school achievement in the ways they did. In addressing these interests, the Chinese American students sometimes had to choose between the values promoted by family and school and those promoted by peers. Sometimes they would make choices that contradicted the traditional values. "Slacking off" is a good example of this. In struggling to reconcile these competing values, the Chinese American students sometimes experienced "affective dissonance", internal conflict arising from competing value frames (see Fordham and Ogbu, 1988).

Now that I'm in America, Maybe I Should Change.

Matthew was a 16 year old sophomore who moved with his family from Taiwan to the United States seven years ago. Both parents were college graduates.

His father owned a small business, and his mother was a retired accountant. His older brother attended a local community college, and his younger sister was in eighth grade. Matthew was a handsome, agreeable young man who was beginning to grow out of the lankiness of adolescence. When he was not talking with girls or playing basketball, he enjoyed hanging out with friends and watching Monday Night Football.

When it came to school, Matthew had mixed feelings. He considered learning through formal instruction to be only marginally important. He managed to get C's and B's, but beyond this he did not see any need to exert effort. In his view, some classes were too easy, and much of the material was irrelevant and boring:

> Or like math- when I was beginning it was really easy. You know, I'd blaze through it, and I'd have to wait 'till everybody'd catch up, so I was thinking it was boring- maybe I shouldn't go to class or something. But in, you know- people think if you don't go to class you don't really understand anything. But I think I could do just as fine without going to school, and just start my own life right now, and go to work, or something.

The claim that he could quit school and live well appears to be purely speculative. There is no indication that he actually planed to drop out. Matthew made this point to emphasize that there are more important lessons to be learned in school.

The learning that Matthew claimed to value most had to do with social relationships. Like other Chinese American students, he believed that high school was a necessary step "to prepare yourself to be ready for future life." His concept of academic preparation, however, was somewhat different than that of his peers, who believed that high school prepares students to go to college. Matthew argued that high school's main purpose was to serve as a training ground where students could learn social skills. Here, the goal was to "meet people" and gain "life experience."

> Well, it trains you like in a way how to take this thing and expand it- get more into it. For instance, like the way you talk to friends- the more friends you talk to, you understand more about other people.

In this view, the most valuable learning takes place when students talk to each other, and the most valuable lessons have to do with getting along with people.

> I mean I don't get good grades. I started school, I tried not to talk on either side of people. I tried to be myself. Well I would- I talk to both sides when I really want to. I'm accepted by most people.

In this comment, Matthew explained an important social reality at school. He realized that, as a Chinese American, he was caught between two opposing categories of people-- the "smart" students and the "dumb" ones. He recognized that, in order to deal with these two groups, he had to "talk on either side of people." In other words, he had to display his educational achievements in the presence one group and hide them in the presence of the other. Perhaps he felt a certain insincerity or hypocrisy in presenting two faces. Whatever his motives were, he ultimately decided that the best strategy was to "be (him)self"-- to adopt an identity which was somehow independent of others' expectations. This approach apparently won him the acceptance of most people.

In distancing himself from Chinese American culture, he rejected some of its defining values. He explained why he made this choice:

> Most (other Chinese Americans) are following their parents. In a way, they're more Asian cultural-wise. They keep closer to their own culture. I'm thinking now that I'm in America, maybe I should change.

This decision brought him into direct conflict with those who were most directly responsible for fostering his educational values-- his parents:

> My mom- my parents pressure me to (get good grades), but I don't want to follow the tradition, you know, so they tell me to do it, so I do the opposite. You know, like (voice of parent:) "You gotta work." (own voice:) "No." (voice of parent:) "Go do your homework." (own voice:) "No." Everything they say- (voice of parent:) "You eat. Eat with us." (own voice:) "No."

> Things are like the other way around- I try to be... It's supposed to help you- when parents pressure you, but I think later on, you can't always rely on your parents being behind your back. It has to be your self-discipline- your- just being yourself- take control of things yourself.

Conclusion

It is no surprise to hear that an American teenager mildly rebelled against authority. What is surprising is that there has been virtually no major research on this behavior among Asian American adolescents. The family/cultural hypothesis, with its emphasis on group harmony and collective good, provides no way of accounting for conflict between Asian American children and their parents, teachers, and/or peers. Likewise, the status mobility hypothesis, which examines how Asian Americans react to conditions outside the group, cannot account for conflicting values within the group. I argue that these theories place too much emphasis on how Asian Americans accommodate the dominant society. Consequently, they cannot explain elements of resistance.

This is not to say that these theories are wholly inaccurate. On the contrary, this study suggests they effectively identify important factors influencing the students' perceptions of education. As the status mobility hypothesis predicts, the Chinese American students believed that education is the primary avenue to success. They maintained the folk belief that personal success or failure is determined by the effort they exert. Consistent with the family/cultural hypothesis were the frequent references to how parents reinforce these beliefs. The students were aware of their parents' sacrifices for them, and they felt a sense of obligation to do well in school.

What these explanations do not fully consider is the influence of other students. I have argued that the Chinese Americans' perception of peers was the most immediate factor influencing their attitudes and behaviors within the school setting. This factor mediated the influence of cultural norms and status awareness.

The students were concerned with avoiding conflict with a variety of student groups. To strive for good grades while avoiding ridicule, the Chinese American students used a variety strategies somewhat similar to those used by high-achieving African American students. These efforts to accommodate ideologically conflicting groups caused them to feel affective dissonance, which, in turn, led some to reject traditional educational values and to adopt behaviors associated with resistance.

These findings call into question culturally-based explanations of school success or failure. Some researchers have argued quite convincingly against "cultural deficit" theories which associate poor school performance with differences between home and school values (see Trueba, 1988). This research suggests that educators should also question "cultural advantage" theories. These views are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. The assumption behind both is that students learn best when there is congruence between their cultural beliefs and the content and aims of the curriculum. This assertion sounds reasonable in principle, but in practice it is problematic. Cultural beliefs within a given group are neither uniform nor fixed. Rather, individuals within a group maintain variations of a common belief system, and they adjust their beliefs to a certain extent depending on the social context. The dynamic nature of culture makes it difficult for teachers to produce a "culturally appropriate" curriculum. There is a danger that such efforts fall will back on reductionistic views of culture and learning. Perhaps it would be more productive for teachers to see their students, not only as members of certain ethnic groups, but also as members of multiple social networks in and around school. While this view adds another layer of complication to the task of producing an effective curriculum, it also clarifies things by bringing to the forefront the factors which most immediately influence students' beliefs and actions in class.

References

Aguilar, M. (1981). Insider research: An ethnography of a debate. In D.A. Messerschmidt (Ed.) Anthropologists at home: Methods and issues in the study of one's own society. (pp. 15-26). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Divoky, Diane. (1988). The model minority goes to school. Phi Delta Kappan, 70, 219-22.

Ellen, R.F. ed. (1984). Ethnographic research: A guide to general conduct. London: Academic Press.

Fetterman, David M. (1989). Ethnography step by step. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications

Foley, D.E. (1991). Reconsidering anthropological explorations of ethnic school failure. Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 22(1), 60-86.

Fordham, Signithia and Ogbu, John U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of 'acting white'. Urban Review, 18(3), 176-206.

Gibson, Margaret A. (1988). Accommodation without assimilation: Sikh immigrants in an American high school. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Goetz, J.P. (1981). Ethnographic research and the problem of data reduction. Anthropology and Education Quarterly ,12(1), 51-70.

Giroux, Henry A. (1983). Theories of reproduction and resistance in the new sociology of education: A critical analysis. Harvard Education Review, 53(3), 257-293.

Hammersley, Martyn and Atkinson, Paul. (1983). Ethnography: Principles in practice. London: Tavistock.

Hartman, Joan S. and Askounis, Anna C. (1989). Asian American students: Are they really a model minority? School Counselor, 37, 85-88.

Hess, Robert D.; Chih-Mei, Chang; and McDevitt, Teresa M. (1987). Cultural variations in family beliefs about children's performance in mathematics: Comparisons among People's Republic of China, Chinese-Americans, and Caucasian-American families. Journal of Educational Psychology,79(2), 179-188.

Kim, Uichol and Chun, Maria B.J. (1992). Educational 'success' of Asian Americans: An indigenous perspective. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April, 1992.

LeCompte, Margaret D. and Goertz, Judith P. (1982). Problems of reliability and validity in ethnographic research. Review of Educational Research,. 52(1), 31-60.

Markus, Hazel Rose and Kitayama, Shinobu. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation." Psychological Review, 98, 224-53.

Matsumoto, Gary M.; Meredith, Gerald M.; and Masuda, Minoru. (1973). Ethnic identity: Honolulu and Seattle Japanese-Americans. In Stanley Sue and Nathanial N. Wagner (Eds.) Asian American perspectives. (pp. 65-74). Palo Alto, Ca.: Science & Behavior Books, Inc.

Miles, Matthew B. and Humberman, A. Michael. (1984). Qualitative data analysis. Sage Publications: Newbury Park.

Mizokawa, Donald T. and Ryckman, David B. (1990). Attributions of academic success and failure: A comparison of six Asian-American ethnic groups. Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 21(4), 434-51.

Ogbu, John U. (1978). Minority education and caste: The American system in cross-cultural perspective. New York: Academic Press.

Ogbu, John U. (1983). Minority status and schooling in plural societies. Comparative Education Review, 27, 168-90.

Sanday, P.R. (1979). The ethnographic paradigm(s) in J. Van Maanen (ed.) Qualitative methodology. (pp. 19-35). Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

Slaughter-Defoe, D.T.; Nakagawa, K.; Takanishi, R.; and Johnson, D.J. (1990). Toward cultural/ecological perspectives on schooling and achievement in African- and Asian-American children. Child Development, 61, 363-383.

Spradley, James P. (1979). The ethnographic interview. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.

Sue, David; Ino, Steve; and Sue, Diane M. (1983). Nonassertiveness of Asian Americans: An accurate assumption? Journal of Counseling Psychology, 30(4), 581-88.

Sue, Derald Wing. (1973). Ethnic identity: The impact of two cultures on the psychological development of Asians in America. in Stanley Sue and Nathanial N. Wagner (Eds.) Asian American perspectives. (pp. 140-150) Palo Alto, Ca.: Science & Behavior Books, Inc.

Sue, Stanley and Kitano, H.H.L. (1973). Stereotypes as a measure of success. Journal of Social Issues, 29, 83-98.

Sue, Stanley and Okazaki, Sumie. (1990). Asian-American educational achievements: A phenomenon in search of an explanation. American Psychologist, 45(8), 913-920.

Sue, Stanley and Sue, Derald Wing. (1973). Chinese-American personality and mental health. in Stanley Sue and Nathanial N. Wagner (Eds.) Asian American perspectives. (pp. 111-124) Palo Alto, Ca.: Science & Behavior Books, Inc.

Takaki, Ronald. (1989). Strangers from a different shore: A history of Asian Americans. New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc.

Trueba, Henry T. (1988). Culturally based explanations of minority students' academic achievement. Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 19, 270-287.

Trueba, Henry T., Cheng, Lily, and Ima, Kenji. (1993). Myth or reality: Adaptive strategies of Asian Americans in California. Washington, D.C.: The Falmer Press.

Ueda, R. (1974). The Americanization and education of Japanese-Americans: A psychodramatic and dramaturgical perspective. In E.G. Eppos (Ed.) Cultural pluralism. Berkeley: McCutchan.

Willis, Paul. (1977). Learning to labour. Lexington: Heath.

Yao, Esther Lee. (1985). A comparison of family characteristics of Asian American and Anglo American high achievers. International Journal of Comparative Sociology, 26, 198-207.

Yu, A.B. and Yang, K.S. (1992). The nature of achievement motivation in collectivistic societies. In U. Kim, S.C. Choi, and C. Kagitcibasi (Eds.) Individualism and Collectivism II: Social and Applied Issues.